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Art and Consumption in Post-Bubble Japan

From Postmodern Irony to Shared Engagement

Gunhild Borggreen

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Abstract

This chapter examines visual art as a reflection of, or response to, socio-political issues in Japan. Departing from the notion of ‘the artist as ethnographer’, the chapter discusses a number of artworks and art projects created in Japan from the 1990s onwards, pointing out how they engage with consumption in everyday life from an ethnographic perspective. The examples illustrate how the transformation from the third to the fourth stage of consumer society, as suggested by the sociologist Miura Atsushi, is reflected in three different modes of consumption within contemporary art. The examples show how art may reflect overall tendencies concerning the way in which consumption contributes to the formation of social patterns and behaviour in contemporary Japanese society.

Keywords: consumer behaviour, art as commodity, artist as ethnographer, popular culture, artistic altruism, local communities

Introduction: Japan as consumer society

In the post-war era, much of Japan’s national identity has been characterized by how well the country did economically in the global arena. Since the 1960s, the Japanese economy developed with remarkable speed, becoming the world’s second-largest economy after the USA, and during the years of the economic boom, in the 1970s and 1980s, the Japanese population moved from being a nation of savers to a nation of spenders. The rapid expansion

of mass consumption in the post-war era brought about many social and cultural changes to Japanese society. While house prices in urban areas, especially around Tokyo, rocketed during the bubble economy, still more types of consumption emerged, exposing burgeoning affluence – from cars and electronics to luxury fashion design and brands, and overseas travel. Consumption and the act of spending money became an indicator of the nation's success, and mass consumption was sustained by other traits that characterized post-war Japan: a large domestic market and good infrastructure of communication, distribution, and information (Clammer 1997: 6). Even in the post-bubble period of economic recession, the domestic consumer market seemed to thrive as a means of keeping a dynamic economy going, despite the high rates of unemployment, the expanding gap between social stratifications in Japanese society, and the financial challenges confronting local communities in the northern part of Japan in the wake of the triple disaster of the earthquake, tsunami, and nuclear meltdown in 2011.

Indeed, mass consumption has become such a significant trait of post-war Japan that a number of sociologists, anthropologists, and ethnographers focus in their research on the ways in which the manufacture, exchange, and consumption of material objects, as well as the cultural codes and values they embody, contribute to the formation of social patterns and behaviour in contemporary Japanese society. This includes giving attention to how Western consumer goods and lifestyles were domesticated by Japanese consumers as Japan moved from the periphery to the core of the world economy during the 1980s (Tobin 1992). Sociologists examine urbanization as a major force behind the development of mass consumption, as well as how consumption relates to social stratification, generational variations, and gender (Clammer 1997; McCreery 2000). Others explore the role of consumption in media and advertising practices in Japan as a part of individuals' self-reflection and identity formation, or investigate how consumption influences modes of body manipulation through dreams and desires created by fashion and beauty industries (Skov and Moeran 1995; Miller 2006). Mass consumption is often closely associated with popular culture and includes perspectives on commercialized fan culture and celebrity aspiration as well as studies of the impact of entertainment, leisure, and the tourism industries (Kelly 2004; Linhart and Frühstück 1998; Toyota 2009).

Lining up an overview of consumption patterns in Japanese society, sociologist Miura Atsushi (2014) identifies four stages of consumer society since the early twentieth century, each spanning about three decades. The first stage, from 1912 to 1942, signified the rise of modern consumer society in the wake of the Sino-Japanese war (1894-1895) and the Russo-Japanese war

(1904-1905), and the booming world economy following the First World War. This stage was characterized by a growing population in Japan's big cities, especially Tokyo, and the advent of modern, Westernized lifestyles, including clothes, food, and electrical appliances, as well as the development and growth of mass media (especially radio) and the entertainment industry. Miura defines the second-stage consumer society as lasting from 1945 to the mid-1970s, and it was characterized by the rise of the nuclear family in urban areas, which resulted in a boom in the housing industry, as well as in the production of other items that were advertised as improvements for modern family life. The third stage occurred around the time of the oil crisis in the early 1970s, and continued to around 2005. During this period, the annual economic growth rate decreased, even during the 'bubble' economy of the late 1980s, and Miura explains this as being the result of a general shift from family-oriented consumption to individual consumption. Many consumer products in the third stage no longer simply fulfilled the desire for bigger versions of the same products (larger cars, larger televisions), but catered to individuals with taste and sophistication by focusing on quality and luxury.

The 1980s saw a number of new concepts that signified social change: *shinjinrui*, 'the new people' or 'the new humans', had been born in the 1960s and would become adults at the time when political and activist movements in Japan had vanished, and the generation was directed instead towards consumerism (Miura 2014: 38). More importantly, consumption no longer took the form of mass consumption, where everyone sought the same type of products, but had become individualized and was thereby promoted as personalized, creative consumption, in which each consumer could create their own unique identity through the purchase of specific brands and luxury goods, particularly in fashion and design. The third-stage consumer society is characterized by an individualized pursuit of 'happiness' through consumption. The flipside of this was an increase in the number of people who felt isolated and alone; many people lost their jobs during the free-market policies, and 1998 was the year in which a surge in suicide numbers in Japan started (a surge that still continues) (ibid.: 19).

It is, in part, these contradictions between individualized luxury and excessive consumption on the one hand and a sense of loss and spiritual emptiness on the other that accelerated what Miura identifies as 'a new model of consumerism'. This new model, as a fourth stage of consumer society, focuses on reversing the individualistic tendencies and rebuilding connections among people (ibid.: 20). The disastrous events of the Kobe earthquake and the sarin gas attack in 1995, as well as those of the triple disaster of March 2011, spurred a wave of volunteer and NPO (non-profit

organization) engagement in helping victims and rebuilding local communities. Miura presents a number of significant changes that took place in Japanese society in the early years of the new millennium, which formed part of consumer society's transformation from the third stage to the fourth stage: luxury brand names were exchanged for the simple and the casual, and the craze for a Western, urban, and individualistic lifestyle shifted more towards a focus on the local, regional, and decentralized organization of everyday life. There is less emphasis on goods and more focus on services, and a general move from self-oriented and egoistic behaviour towards society-oriented and altruistic interaction. According to Miura, Japanese society in the first decade of the twenty-first century exhibits a general tendency away from possessiveness towards sharing (ibid.: 129).

Miura recognizes that the four stages of consumer behaviour do not replace each other, but rather make up additional layers of already existing patterns. For the same reason, it can also be doubted how widespread Miura's rather optimistic reading of a new model of consumerism in Japanese society actually is, or how effective it may be in terms of changing the economic structures of late-capitalist Japan. However, as the following analysis will show, there are a number of commonalities between tendencies on the art scene and Miura's overview of sociological trajectories. Many of the artists from the 1990s continue their aesthetic practices today, but a number of young artists have formulated alternative art forms and practices that align with Miura's observations concerning social-oriented behaviour and attitudes of sharing.

The artist as ethnographer

The reason for me to dwell somewhat on anthropological and sociological perspectives on consumption is that art is a part of the broader society and plays an important role in the realm of consumption. Not only are art objects produced and exchanged as consumer goods; more importantly, artworks and artistic practices can be seen as manifestations of ethnographic encounters. When artists address the topic of consumption, they do so because they themselves are part of a society of ubiquitous consumption, and because artists, as many other members of the community, have an interest in registering and interpreting phenomena that take place in the surrounding society. Artists have the skills to apply the aesthetic medium of art to communicate such interpretations to others. By doing so, the artist challenges the notion of *l'art pour l'art*, art for art's sake, in which a modernist understanding of aesthetic value comprises a closed circuit that refers

to art itself as the standard of aesthetic judgement. Many artists use art as a means to raise attention to socio-political issues in an everyday context, including those connected with consumption. As I will point out, the shift from individualized and brand-name consumption patterns towards community-based and shared lifestyles, as outlined by Miura Atsushi, is a tendency that can be observed within the contemporary art scene of Japan. Artworks and artistic practices reflect the changes in society and influence the way in which people live their everyday life.

The methodological framing of my approach is related to the crossover between art and everyday life that draws upon art theories related to anthropology. From the 1990s onwards, a number of artists and art critics on the international art scene have begun to theorize art as an ethnographic practice, in which artists' involvement with social issues provides not only new aesthetic approaches, but also new critical insights into the culture of everyday life. Discussions of the artist as ethnographer in contemporary art may be traced back to art theorist Hal Foster, who theorizes the complex interaction between anthropology and art in his *The Return of the Real* from 1996. According to Foster, the emergence of the ethnographic turn in contemporary art evolves around the issue of authenticity and reflexivity. Foster identifies a mutual state of 'envy' between anthropologists and artists from the 1980s onwards: the anthropologist longed to become a 'self-aware reader of *culture understood as text*', while artists began applying methods of fieldwork inspired by ethnographic practices (Foster 1996: 180; emphasis in original).

Korean American art critic Miwon Kwon identifies similar discussions concerning reflexivity in critical-art projects during the era of the 'politics of representation' in the 1990s. This was also a period in which contemporary art from regions outside of mainstream Western art circles, such as Japan, India, South Korea, and China, began receiving widespread interest and acclaim on the international art scene, and the ethnographic method of participant observation seemed to offer an opportunity for experience as well as interpretation for many artists (Kwon 2000: 75). In their article on art and ethnography, artist and ethnographer Larissa Hjorth and art historian Kristen Sharp describe contemporary art practices that focus upon socially engaged interventions and privilege collaboration and participation as an echo of the counter-artefact and political philosophies of many art movements in the 1960s. While collective art activities aim to engage local communities and non-artist participation, such public engagements primarily seek aesthetic and sociocultural reflection about the changing environment, and are not necessarily focused on a specific political outcome (Hjorth and Sharp 2014: 133).

Mapping the large number of artworks and art projects created in Japan from the 1990s onwards, one finds many examples of works that engage with consumption in everyday life from an ethnographic perspective. The artworks selected for this chapter have been chosen to highlight the three different ways in which consumption is reflected in contemporary art. These three modes follow the outlines of the transformation from the third to the fourth stage of consumer society as suggested by Miura above. The first mode contains artworks in which representations of consumer-related products, symbols, and configurations are central; the second mode features works that become consumer products themselves; and the third mode contains examples of art projects connected to altruism and engagement with the social concerns of local communities.

Representations of consumption

When the Japanese contemporary artist Morimura Yasumasa in 1991 produced the artwork *Elder Sister*, it became an instant success on the international art scene. The artwork displays the ideal Japanese luxury consumer of the late 1980s: an elegant, slender woman, probably in her thirties, posing in front of a bright blue backdrop. Her made-up face is shown in profile, and her hair is tied up. She is dressed in a Louis Vuitton suit and matching high-heeled shoes, and she wears multiple and excessive pearl necklaces and gold chains around her neck. She has a Gucci handbag on one shoulder, and is holding a Louis Vuitton umbrella, while the corner of a Hermès scarf flows from her handbag, flashing a glimpse of some of the most famous luxury fashion brands known to Japanese women in the late 1980s. The artwork *Elder Sister* is widely understood as a parody: the model in the photo is the artist Morimura Yasumasa himself, who is cross-dressed in an exaggerated display of luxury fashion brands and expensive jewellery, providing what Jennifer Robertson has called a binary construction of enigmatic presentism (Robertson 2009: 18). The female figure is not a 'real' woman, but an imaginary and constructed persona who carries signs of wealth that could be forgeries and cheap copies of designer clothes and jewellery, thus alluding to the notion of counterfeit goods as something produced in Asia. While the figure appears to be preoccupied by (or posing for) something outside of the frame, the plain blue background of the image offers no indication of space or context and seems to point to 'nowhere', in a thinly disguised, tongue-in-cheek, postmodernist ironic comment on the pursuit of 'happiness' through consumption.

Figure 8.1 Morimura Yasumasa, *Elder Sister* (1991)



Chromogenic print on canvas, 78 ¾ x 47 ¼ inches (200 x 120 cm). Collection San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, Gift of Vicky and Ken Logan. Photograph by Katherine Du Tiel. Photograph courtesy of San Francisco Museum of Modern Art. © Morimura Yasumasa. Courtesy of the artist and Luhring Augustine, New York

In her photographic work, the artist Yanagi Miwa features the female figure within the physical and architectural environments of consumption: the shopping arcade and the department store. Yanagi's large-scale photographs from the early and mid-1990s all depict the lift girl as the main character: the generic female figure who functions as an elevator guide or service provider in department stores. The figure of the elevator girl is highly symbolic of consumer society, because she is embedded through body and clothes in the brand and marketing strategies of corporate capitalism, and she literally points out the abundance of consumer goods to the customer. Moreover, in the midst of the halls of consumption, the elevator girl as a figure is herself an object of visual pleasure to be looked at and consumed. This is clear in the work *Annaijō no heya 1F* (Elevator girl house 1F) from the series 'Erebētā gāru' from 1997, in which some of the elevator girls are placed behind the glass of a showcase window as a literal representation of a display.¹

The environment depicted in Yanagi's photographic representation is strange and surreal, because the space is populated only by the elevator girls and devoid of other people. The spatial perspective is composed of an exaggerated vanishing point in each of the two parts, which leads the spectator's gaze into a void of either pitch-blackness or extreme light. Furthermore, the groups of women are strangely out of context as they stand in the showcase windows like mannequin dolls, or sit and lie on the floor of the moving walkway (Herbsreuth 2004: 17). There seems to be no interaction or communication among them, which also hints at the sentiments of social isolation and loneliness that became a significant element in Japanese society during the post-bubble years.

The female figures in the artworks of both Morimura and Yanagi are related to consumption in different ways, but they share the characteristics of elegant, sophisticated women who are at the same time connected to exaggeration or excess: too many pearls and golden necklaces, or too many flowers and clone-like women in a narrow, claustrophobic, and endless space. Such modes of representation may be understood as ironic or critical by the way in which the exaggerations highlight to the viewer things that are assumed to be ordinary.

The works also visualize a discourse identified by anthropologists Jan Bardsley and Hirakawa Hiroko concerning Japanese women's consumption habits (Bardsley and Hirakawa 2005). The discourse on styles of shopping links back to the ideal of a 'good wife, wise mother', who would practise frugality and sacrifice her own personal aspirations for the sake of the

1 An image of this work can be found at <http://www.ntticc.or.jp/en/archive/works/elevator-girl-house-1f/>, accessed 11 May 2017.

family economy. During the 1990s, this had changed, and Western fashion brands became part of an imagined space for creating a reassuring individualized identity as a global cosmopolitan woman with an upper-class, almost aristocratic, sophistication. In their analyses of 'bad girls' in luxury-brand clothing as represented in various television dramas, essayistic writing, and fashion guides during the 1990s, Bardsley and Hirakawa note a significant clash between the idea of the sophisticated and refined consumption of luxury brands as part of an elite lifestyle on the one hand, and the excessive and distasteful consumption practised by crowds of young 'spectacularly unqualified' shoppers on the other (ibid.: 116).

The notion of art objects as economic investments or as symbols of a luxury lifestyle coincided with international attention being paid to contemporary Japanese art in the 1990s, and many private collectors in Japan began investing in works by Japanese artists to supplement their collections of internationally acclaimed Western artists. In other words: for many artists in Japan, the theme of consumption was not only a topic for the content of their work, but also became an issue for their own personal economy. This leads us to the second mode of art practices that address the relationship between art and consumption, namely artists who in their work demonstrate how artworks become part of the consumption system itself.

Art as consumption

When the artist Murakami Takashi invented his character Mr DOB in the early 1990s, he was condensing a number of elements from popular culture and mass consumption. In one of the versions of Mr DOB, seen on the painting titled *And Then, And Then And Then And Then And Then* from 1996, the figure bears some resemblance to Disney's Mickey Mouse or the blue robot cat Doraemon.²

In other versions, where the figure has a three-dimensional form, Mr DOB resembles an anthropomorphized cartoon animal with a large head and large ears, a small, round, blue body with a red bowtie, and white hands and feet featuring three fingers or toes. The bodily proportions have baby-like characteristics (a large head and a small body); the face of Mr DOB has a

² Murakami Takashi's artwork *And Then, And Then And Then And Then And Then* (1996) is reproduced in Kaikai Kiki (2001: 33). The work was produced by Maeda Takeshi, Maeda Hiroshi, Hirata Yoshikazu, Fujiwara Izumi, and Doi Mayuko, and the materials used were acrylic on canvas mounted on board.

pair of eyes (sometimes small, at other times large), a small, round nose, and a small mouth, while the ears are large and round with the letters D and B printed in white on blue. The round face itself makes up the outlines of the letter O. Mr DOB aligns with a number of characters in the Japanese pop culture history, of which Hello Kitty is a familiar example for many. An anthropomorphized kitten with a round head, small eyes, and no mouth, invented by product company Sanrio in 1974, Hello Kitty epitomizes the notion of *kawaii* (cute) in consumerism in Japan.

Murakami Takashi is a member of the new generation of artists who grew up during the 1980s and were identified as part of the *shinjinrui*, 'the new people' or 'the new breed'. The notion of affluence among a growing middle class and the rise of mass consumption during the 1980s and 1990s are reflected in the rise of the Neo-Pop (*neopoppu*) movement, in which young generations of artists such as Nakahara Kōdai, Yanobe Kenji, and Murakami Takashi offered new perspectives on the relationship between art and consumption. The *shinjinrui* generation represents some of the sociocultural transformations of the period of the 1990s, in which society in general moved towards individualized consumerism and lack of political engagement. Mr DOB is only one of many characters developed by Murakami that transgresses the boundaries between fine art and mass-produced popular culture, not only through the visual references to manga and anime culture, but also in the style and distribution of the figure. Versions of Mr DOB exist in which he is depicted using thin black outlines and uniform areas of colour in the manner of the mass-produced graphic designs used in advertising, while other versions are available for use with silk screen technology, which allows many copies of the same image to be produced. Mr DOB is an example of convergence culture, where the same figure is transferred from one type of medium to another: from silk screen prints to one-of-a-kind *Nihonga* style painting, and further to a giant balloon or a three-dimensional sculpture made of FRP resin and fibreglass and painted with acrylic paint. As a member of the *otaku* (geek or nerd) youth culture, which provides the primary consumers of manga, anime, and game products, Murakami set out to challenge the conventions and cultural systems of *otaku* communities and *dōjinshi* (fan-driven magazines) environments, for example by modifying the aesthetics of the collectable, small-size figurines and creating life-size figures, thus positioning these characters as disturbingly similar to sex dolls (Murakami 2001: 138).

Not only did Murakami infiltrate the manga and anime fan communities with his art, he also managed to throw popular culture into the realms of fine art. While some of his activities are framed as provocations of the

otaku culture, most of Murakami's strategies do not poke fun at luxury consumption patterns in the same way as Morimura Yasumasa's *Elder Sister* discussed above. Murakami seems more attuned towards the specific art market. Art has always been an object of trade and economic exchange, and the importance of this to the professional artist as one of the pillars of the vocation should not be underestimated. The rise of private-art collectors and galleries, as well as public museums, in the late nineteenth century saw the development of a commercial art market with art fairs and auction houses, and an increasingly large number of professionals engaged in handling the art objects: art dealers, art consultants, art journalists, art critics, museum curators, art gallery directors, and many more. However, the somewhat romanticized notion that the artist should be detached from any commercial interest and be driven primarily by his or her personal aesthetic conceptions still prevails – as if economic interest somehow contaminates the 'purenness' of artistic expression.

Murakami Takashi challenged this notion by talking openly about his goal of obtaining economic as well as artistic success. Taking the concept from the 1960s' pop-art hero Andy Warhol, Murakami established an art factory in 1996 (first named Hiropon Factory and later refashioned as the multinational company Kaikai Kiki Co., Ltd), which hires people to produce his artworks under careful guidance, and also to manage all business aspects of art production and sales, such as planning gallery shows and exhibitions, organizing promotion and advertising, copyright issues and translations, film and television production, and many other activities (Rothkopf 2007: 149). In line with the individualized pursuit of pleasure through consumption of luxury and high-fashion items, Murakami Takashi developed collaborations with fashion brands such as Louis Vuitton and Issey Miyake, and exhibited his artworks in places engulfed in myths of affluence and luxury such as the Versailles palace in France (2010) and Qatar Museums in Doha in Qatar (2012). As art critic Scott Rothkopf argues, capitalism's absorption of art makes it increasingly difficult to define the ontological status of art by morally judging its position in the art/commerce divide. In his words, 'Murakami has managed to develop a practice that cannot be comfortably accommodated within art's otherwise infinitely elastic frame' (ibid.: 157). Considering the crossover between art and consumption, Murakami Takashi demonstrates more than anyone the way in which art can be co-opted for branding purposes and how the art market succumbs to broader economic systems with regard to investment strategies and sponsorships (ibid.: 145).

Numerous art critics are sceptical towards Murakami's blurring of artistic and commercial interests in his entrepreneurship, and even the artist

himself admits there's a danger of compromising his reputation as an artist (Frederick 2003: 60). However, Murakami is not the only contemporary artist to benefit from selling merchandise licensed with the signature figure or style of the artist. Many other contemporary artists in Japan (and elsewhere) have collaborated with brand names in fashion, communications, and other consumer goods companies to enhance their cultural as well as their economic value. One notable example is Kusama Yayoi, an artist who has been active since the late 1950s, and who has recently ventured into artistic collaborations with companies such as Louis Vuitton, Coca Cola, and the Japanese telecompany KDDI (Jørgensen, Laurberg, and Holm 2015: 112-13). In 2012, the flagship store of Louis Vuitton on Fifth Avenue in New York covered the entire surface of the building with black polka dots (Kusama's signature theme), and featured a window display of organic-looking, red-coloured oblong protuberances covered in white polka dots. In the midst of this entanglement was an exact copy of Kusama herself, complete with polka-dot dress, orange wig, and sun glasses, carrying a Louis Vuitton handbag with Kusama polka-dot design.

In many ways, Kusama preceded Murakami Takashi in terms of commercial activities, although her practices have often been interpreted within the realm of avant-garde critique, as when she addressed the issue of the commodification of art by selling mirror balls for US\$2 (approx. €2.07) each during her intervention *Narcissus Garden* at the Venice International Art Biennale in 1966 (Munroe 1989: 28). Kusama had not received an official invitation to exhibit at the Biennale, but brought more than a thousand plastic balls covered with silver foil and spread them out in an outdoor space between the pavilions. Kusama herself was dressed in a golden kimono, and she interacted with the people passing by and handed over mirror balls to those who wanted to buy one. The silver foil had a mirror effect, meaning that individuals would see a distorted reflection of themselves on the surface of the ball. Together, all the balls in this *Narcissus Garden* became a symbol of the strong, self-perpetuating powers of the commercial art market, as they all reflected and referred to each other.

Art historian Midori Yoshimoto argues that Kusama's happening aimed to undermine the power structures of the art market at the Venice Biennale, and that her project highlighted 'the narcissism that lies in the act of art collecting, equating it with money, one of the symbols of vanity' (Yoshimoto 2005: 68). Ultimately, the Biennale authorities asked Kusama to pack up her remaining mirror balls and leave the Biennale, but at that point she had already made headlines in the art media that covered the Biennale events (Yoshimoto 2005: 69).

Figure 8.2 Kusama hands a mirror ball to a member of the audienceKusama Yayoi, *Narcissus Garden* (1966), 33th Venice Biennale, Italy. © YAYOI KUSAMA

Community-based consumption

If art practices of artists such as Murakami Takashi and Kusama Yayoi epitomize the consumerist tendencies of possessiveness and self-oriented lifestyles that emerged during the 1990s, new forms of art projects and aesthetic strategies appeared around the turn of the millennium that are more society-oriented and altruistic in nature. An example of this is the Kansai-based artist Date Nobuaki, who engages in aspects of consumption on many levels.

His artwork *Terayamake ukurere* (The Terayama house ukulele) from 2000 is a ukulele constructed by Date in close collaboration with Mr Terayama, who was to demolish the house in which he grew up in the city of Nagaokakyō in Kyoto Prefecture, and to build a new one instead.³ The ukulele looks like an ordinary ukulele in its shape and function, but the material from which it is constructed differs from that used in a conventional musical instrument: it is made of wood retrieved from Mr Terayama's house, which was demolished due to old age. During dialogues between the artist and the house owner, it was decided to use the *hashira* (pillar) in

³ This artwork was reproduced in Date (2004, no pagination), Catalogue no. 3. The artist used wood from pillars in Mr Terayama's former house.

the living room of the old house to create the front and back of the body of the ukulele. Mr Terayama recounts how, as a child, he used to put stickers on the pillar next to the TV, and drew and scribbled on it, and that the stickers reflected the popular culture of the early 1970s. For example, the vertical sticker of a comic character named Gakubei on the right-hand side of the front of the ukulele was part of a collection of 100 different stickers that were included in the Morinaga Chocobei chocolate bar packages in 1974. The ukulele made by Date thus comes to embody the material of a vanished building as well as the memory of the childhood cultural practice of collecting stickers with funny characters in chocolate packages. For Date, the building itself is 'a vessel filled with people's lives', and the process of what he calls 'ukulele-ization' (*ukurere-ka*) 'is just an act of transforming the figure of the vessel' (Date 2004).

After its completion, the ukulele was presented to the former house owner with the traces and residue of everyday life inscribed within the actual materiality of the musical instrument. The ukulele seems to have induced a performative as well as a sonic experience, because the receiver of Date's ukulele reports that he has taken up learning to play the ukulele and, in addition, a famous Hawaiian ukulele player, Mr Ōta, has autographed the front of the instrument (*ibid.*). The ukulele as a material object has visual and sensuous references to a specific place, and the creation of the ukulele represents both a shared process of production as well as an altruistic act on the part of the artist.

This is only one of many ukuleles that Date Nobuaki has created since he began the project in 2000. In several cases, the ukuleles are made of materials derived from private homes, and in other cases the artist collects material from public buildings, such as schools, a welfare house, a bar, or a *sentō* (communal bath house). The ukulele becomes an object to preserve memories from buildings that are to be torn down, and thereby points to issues related to gentrification processes in urban areas and consumption in the real-estate market, because many houses in Japan are not made to last for more than one generation. Many of the public institutions housed in demolished buildings have played important roles in the local community, such as the communal bath house or the school, and people who see the ukulele later on report that they remember the physical space of these sites as well as the social interactions that took place within them. The production of ukuleles is a process of sharing narratives and memories from specific sites in local communities, and the consumption system is based on an exchange of material objects and services between the artist and his audience: wood, textile, wall paper, and other objects from the demolished

house in return for a ukulele. Materials that are considered waste – and thus worthless in economic terms – are turned into cultural artefacts in the hands of the artist, and the act of handing the material back to the local community is an act of altruism.

Date's art project is an example of how some art practices follow the model of a fourth-stage consumer society by moving away from a strictly economy-based and self-centred form of consumption to a society-oriented exchange of other types of valuables, such as memory and a sense of community in the local neighbourhood. It is a kind of artistic altruism, because the project is a means to create appreciation and satisfaction among individuals and groups who have histories and memories linked to the site and the materiality involved.

The artist Nishiko ventured into a similar altruistic art project in 2011. Titled *Jishin o naosu purojekuto* (Repairing earthquake project), the project includes many processes and interactions, and can be divided into different phases. Nishiko was living in The Hague in Holland at the time of the 11 March earthquake and subsequent tsunami, and apparently felt an urge to return to Japan and engage in the recovery process (Takehisa 2012). In September 2011, Nishiko travelled to areas in the Tōhoku region, such as Higashi-Matsushima, Watari, and Ishinomaki, which had been affected by the tsunami, and undertook the task of finding objects that had been lost in the waves of water. Nishiko talked with inhabitants of the neighbourhood and listened to their stories about what they experienced during the tsunami, and initiated other activities that established personal relationships between the artist and people from the local community (Nishiko 2012). During this phase of creating relationships, Nishiko began to collect items in the debris that were broken, making sure that she only collected objects that were not claimed by others, and paying no attention to whether the object could be repaired or not. Nishiko established workshops at two different art events: the first workshop took place at the Arcus Project Ibaraki as a satellite studio programme related to the Yokohama Triennale 2011; a second workshop was held at the Contemporary Art Center (Mito Geijutsukan Gendai Bijutsu Sentā) at Art Tower Mito in 2012. At the second workshop, Nishiko set up an open studio in which she repaired some of the many objects she had collected. Having no prior experience of how to repair things made of different types of material, she received advice on such matters from visitors to the studio or from people she had met in the disaster areas. In the photo from Phase Two, parts of a broken, blue-and-white porcelain plate are visibly glued together, and missing fragments replaced by a white material.

Figure 8.3 Nishiko, *Jishin o naosu purojekuto* (Repairing earthquake project) (2012), object no. 201104



Photograph by Yamamoto Yūki. Photograph courtesy of Nishiko. © Nishiko

Thus, the signs of disaster are not erased or ignored, but treated as part of an everyday reality that needs mending. Similar to the ukuleles of Date Nobuaki's project, the objects of Nishiko's earthquake repair project become artefacts that embody memories of everyday experience and practical, tangible matters in ways that seem to be devoid of commercial interest.

With the help of photographer Yamamoto Yūki, Nishiko has created a photographic archive in which she records the objects on a neutral, grey background. This type of neutral registration of objects provides a sense of detachment that stands in contrast to the many emotional narratives of the tsunami catastrophe of 2011. More importantly, the photos and the objects lose their specific historical context and come to resemble an archive of archaeological remains that could have originated from any time, any place. This contradicts the notion of singularity concerning the 2011 disaster – not as a way of ignoring the significance of this specific event, but as a way of highlighting how 'disaster' is defined in the first place, and by whom. The 2011 Tōhoku earthquake and tsunami have been embraced as a form of 'consumption of the spectacle' through the enormous media coverage of it, and the way in which politicians and government institutions have capitalized on the emotional rhetoric of words such as *kizuna* (bound)

and *tsunagu* (to connect) as a way to promote national recovery (Samuels 2013). Nishiko's somewhat detached relationship to the artefacts of disaster, visualized in the aesthetic property of the photographic documentation, reflects her ethical concern of showing respect for those who live in the afflicted areas (Takehisa 2012: 128).

There are other examples of artists who engage in local communities through different types of values exchanges that defy conventional capitalist systems. For instance, the artist Katō Tsubasa built a large-scale 'lighthouse' construction from tsunami debris in the town of Iwaki and got the local inhabitants to help raise the structure by pulling on the ropes (*hiki-okosu*). In addition, there is also the artists' group Nadegata Instant Party, which organizes local festivals for volunteer supporters (Hattori 2015).

Another type of sharing can be seen in the recent formations of collective art groups in Japan. The artist collective as a social and aesthetic construction is not a new phenomenon, as testified by many examples, such as the avant-garde group MAVO, which was active in the 1920s, as well as artist groups such as Gutai, Neo Dadaism Organizers (Neo Dadaizumu Oruganaizāzu), Hi-Red Centre (Haireddo Sentā), and many others from the 1950s and 1960s. Recent groups, such as the Tokyo-based Chim↑Pom, formed in 2005, take up many of the aesthetic strategies of the avant-garde by organizing happenings in public spaces, as when Chim↑Pom performed the artistic intervention of adding an extra panel to the large mural painting by Okamoto Tarō at Shibuya station as a comment on the Fukushima Daiichi nuclear power plant meltdown in 2011. Another group of young artists is Me, formed in 2012, and active in creating site-specific installations of great complexity at the leading art festivals in Japan, such as the Setouchi Art Triennale (Setouchi Kokusai Geijutsusai) in 2013 and the Echigo-Tsumari Art Triennale (Echigo-Tsumari Āto Toriennāre) in 2015. Creating and exploring new art forms as collective groups rather than individual artists challenges the ego-centred art production of the post-bubble era, in which artists such as Murakami Takashi and Kusama Yayoi became synonymous with brand names within art consumption. Sharing the authorship of artwork is another way of transforming the system of consumption from that of an individualized lifestyle to that of community-oriented, altruistic, and shared engagements.

Conclusion

The examples of artworks and artistic practices outlined above are in no way an exhaustive list of the variety of aesthetic approaches in the Japanese

contemporary art scene. The few examples are nevertheless significant, because they reflect some of the overall tendencies concerning the way in which consumption contributes to the formation of social patterns and behaviour in contemporary Japanese society. Artworks and artistic practices represent and reproduce the production, exchange, and consumption of material objects, and they reveal how exchange systems of economic and cultural values are closely connected and challenge the conventional distinction between 'pure art' and commercial interest.

Some of the artworks included in this chapter may have been motivated by political concerns or by a critical engagement with the way in which consumption affects society and everyday life. Others may not be addressing political change as such, but their artworks may still be seen as a mirror of consumption patterns and behaviour in the sociocultural realm. The point is that the artist acts as a kind of ethnographer, who observes and takes note of issues in everyday life, including those practices and representations that are connected to consumerism as one of the major paradigms in Japanese post-war society.

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